

GIVING A VOICE TO FATHERS IN WALES

The annual Welsh Dads survey gives a voice to men as carers for their children.

The 2017 survey had a total of **419 responses**– representing a more than **100% increase in participation**. (2016 – 209 & 2015 – 149 responses). This would correspond to a sample size of 8780 if the survey had been conducted on a UK wide basis.

Responses were received from each of the 22 Unitary Authorities in Wales ranging from 92 from Cardiff (21.96% of the total) to just 4 each in Powys and Anglesey (0.95% each). 89% of respondents identified as White Welsh / British – lower than in previous years.

KEY FINDINGS

Society is changing. The majority of respondents to the survey shared the care equally or more with the mother of their children (57%). Most fathers and male carers don't have major difficulties – particularly if they are living with the mother of their children. However even with these 'dads' many experience low level sexism in terms of the care of their children – devaluing their role and seeing it subordinate to that of the mother.

Many hundreds of individual comments were left by respondents covering all of the main categories. They provide a rich picture of the experience of fathers and point (as in previous years) to a fundamental underlying problem – **that fathers experience a state funded system that sees mothers as important while men are often an irrelevance or a problem**. There are notable individual exceptions to this dynamic – often where the mother has very serious problems of her own - but the evidence is again overwhelming. When parents separate many fathers – and their wider family – feel very isolated and report that they are actively excluded by public services.

- Most fathers and grandfathers don't have obvious problems with their care giving
- Almost 57% of respondents care for their children equally or more than the mother
- Positive experience of health services outweighed the negative by 2.5: 1
- Positive experiences of education outweighed negative by almost 3:1
- 2/3rds feel their role isn't valued equally with the mother's by authorities & society
- Nearly 80% think the Government should do more to help fathers
- Negative experience of Cafcass Cymru in the Family Court (4:1) was even greater than that of social workers in Local Authorities (3:1)
- 2/3rd of fathers had no experience of parenting support BUT there was a big increase over previous surveys in the positive comments from those who had.

THE VOICES OF FATHERS

'I don't feel there's as much discrimination. However mums seem to be looked at more as primary carers & seem to be given better rights for things like time off work still...'

'I have been told by professionals such things as 'the child is always better with the mother' and that 'you are only the father'

'Because a year ago the children's mother just stopped them coming to see me and I asked for help and none was given by professionals.'

'I feel more like a babysitter than a father as I only see my daughter around her mothers work rota'

'My wife and I look after our children together'

'Most family services don't want to know about dads. They only deal with mothers - particularly when you're separated'

'Perception at work is that mum is the primary carer. Colleagues generally don't share maternity leave despite the fact that they could. The fact that it's unpaid after 9 months doesn't help.'

'The whole system is sexist! That mum gets to stop a loving father seeing his children. No point going to court, the old aged ivory tower twats live in the 50's!!!!!! Awful, but nobody cares!!!!'

'I was made very welcome at my grandsons school - to help him get started and settled in.'

'In almost every aspect of the children's lives people who know us personally will say I'm the parent of better care and the children clearly show this. In every official aspect though I seem to be treated as a second rate individual and decisions made by mother are usually upheld at negative impact to children.'

'Everyone thinks a mother can bring a child up better than a father.'

'It feels like I'm constantly justifying my existence.'

'A father is just as important as a mother to look after his children the best way he can'

'There is still the assumption that mum knows best. It is seen, I believe in a variety of environments. However I do think it is getting better.'

'Taken as a joke, babysitting the children. Not being able to cope, when I am. My decisions are seen only as "fun dad", or "hasn't got a clue dad".'

'My wife values me but I get the feeling that dads are an added extra whereas the mother is the essential part.'

SAMPLE OF QUOTES FROM 226 RESPONDENTS TO THE QUESTION - Do you feel that your role as a father is valued equally to that of a mother by public services and society in general?

THE SURVEY

The 2017 Welsh Dads survey provides an insight into the experience of fathers, grandfathers and father figures in Wales mostly in terms of their engagement with statutory services.

This year's survey added questions about whether the role of the father is valued equally to that of a mother by public services and society in general, and whether Welsh Government and Local Authorities should do more to help and support fathers.

The 2017 survey had a total of **419 responses**– representing a more than **100% increase in participation**. (2016 – 209 & 2015 – 149 responses). This corresponds to a sample size of 8780 if the survey had been conducted on a UK wide basis.

Responses were received from each of the 22 Unitary Authorities in Wales ranging from 92 from Cardiff (21.96% of the total) to just 4 each in Powys and Anglesey (0.95% each).

A total of 14 questions were asked covering some basic demographic data eg age, geographical location, ethnicity, relationship to their child (eg father / step-father / grandfather etc). New to the 2017 survey were a couple of questions that asked about the respondents perception of whether the role of fathers was valued equally to that of mothers, and whether they felt that Government and Local Authorities did enough to support fathers. Questions were also asked about the care they gave to the subject child/ren to get a picture of the practical arrangements for the care of the subject child/ren – eg I care for my child alone / I'm the primary carer / I share the care roughly equally / I am excluded from the care of my child etc. The main elements of the survey related to the experience of fathers in terms of their engagement (or lack of it) with a variety of services – eg Children's Services, Parenting Support (Flying Start / Families First etc) Education and health services as well as more specific services such as Cafcass Cymru (Family Court social work support) and the Police. New to the 2017 survey is a question about the emotional and mental health of fathers.

The survey asked individuals to express their views more fully through a comments facility in each section. These comments represented powerful testimony and provided much greater clarity to underpin the headlines from the statistical data. As a result we have decided to include many of the comments in the body of this report to assist the reader.

Demographics of respondents

The larger sample size resulted in a lower percentage of younger fathers (under 30) taking part – down to 9% from 17%.

- 64% were aged 30 – 49
- 89% identified as White British and almost 4% Asian
- 74% identified as 'Father', 5% as Grandfather, 13% as 'Non Resident father'
- 11% were sole or main carer, 46% shared caring duties roughly equally, 18% provided some care and 18% said they were excluded from the care of their children.

Further detail about the demographic breakdown of respondents is available in the data tables at the end of the report.

Next Steps

The survey will be presented to the meeting of the Welsh Assembly's Cross Party Group on fathers and fatherhood on the 13th June and will be distributed to media outlets in the lead up to Father's Day – 18th June.

We hope to share the findings with local authorities and Welsh Government to feed in to the ongoing work on Population Needs Assessments on a Health Board footprint across Wales.

WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

We are a shared parenting charity working to support those who are being excluded from the lives of the children they care about. Most of our service users (currently c 70%) are fathers facing contact difficulties. We have undertaken this research to collate data around their experience to inform public services as well as the third sector about the issues facing fathers in Wales.

We have also been recognised by Welsh Government and WCVA as a representative body for men as a group with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.

THE BACKGROUND

This is the third annual survey looking at the experience of fathers, grandfathers and father figures in Wales. Although the survey sample size is much larger than previous years the key findings remain broadly similar.

METHODOLOGY

The research has been undertaken by FNF Both Parents Matter Cymru using an online survey tool – Survey Monkey - between 3rd May and 8th June 2017.

We are most grateful to the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) as well as many other County Voluntary Councils such as GAVO, C3SC and VAMT for distributing the survey widely. The charity produced a 30 second video to promote the survey that was widely shared through Facebook and Twitter. We also distributed more than 4,000 A5 flyers across all parts of Wales through shops, libraries, workplace environments and GP surgeries. Service users of the charity were also encouraged to respond via email

Individuals who contributed were not asked for any contact details so as to assure them anonymity.

The survey is primarily qualitative in terms of methodology seeking to capture the experience of fathers and male carers in terms of their engagement with services. This was deliberately chosen as a means of survey design.

ATTITUDES TO FATHERS / DO THEY WANT MORE HELP?

We asked a couple of new questions in the survey this year about the way that fathers feel they are treated by statutory services and whether they believe that authorities need to do more to support the man's role in childcare.

We have already set out a number of comments from respondents to these questions in the section on 'Father's Voices' on page 2 of this report.

1 in 6 respondents said that they felt that the role of the father was valued equally to that of the mother. However around 2/3rds of all respondents believed that their role wasn't recognised or valued equally. 226 respondents to the survey chose to leave additional comments that gave a lot of detail about the issues.

Almost 80% of respondents identified that Government and Local Authorities needed to do more to engage them as parents. Less than 7% seemed happy with the support they felt men received while around 14% didn't know. 206 individuals left comments to this question. Many showed signs of the widespread feeling of exclusion and marginalisation associated with separation difficulties.

'Fathers should be given equal status in law to mothers when looking at care arrangements. Equal rights should mean exactly that.'

'Legislation changes to promote shared parenting, recognise the importance of both parents (when safe) in a child's upbringing and ensure various professional organisations recognise the importance of a father and child relationship'

'I would like more advice via the family information service on raising children; particularly, how to cope when most of my role models were 'strong' men and I don't fit that stereotype.'

'Help me have access to my children without a court'

'Provide support to fathers to prepare them for fatherhood'

'More networks of support for dad's, taking into account that we largely work full time, suffer from loneliness, may be looking or have lost networks of friends due to changing circumstances. Haven't got the endless list of baby groups, classes and support networks that the mum has.'

'Information and workshop days. Advertising male parenting much more prominently.'

'Mandatory paternity leave. Promote the role of father's and the positive impact of their involvement. Combat misleading stereotypes.'

'And support the children and future fathers by supporting contact from the point of separation. Enforce court orders with the police'

HEALTH SERVICES

The experience of fathers engaging with health services was broadly positive. **Just over 51% of respondents identified a positive experience – while just 20% expressed a negative one.** The ratio is a slight improvement on previous years. What was interesting to note was the number of negative comments received

Although most fathers remain content with their engagement with Health Services this hides some deep rooted problems that go beyond the sorts of difficulties that might be expected when parents are divorced or separated.

While it's important to recognise that there were examples shared of small acts of kindness by medical staff taken as a whole the 131 detailed comments paint a picture of a health service that regards fathers as an irrelevance and of secondary status to the mother. Those attitudes harden considerably for those parents who are not the primary carer when separated BUT are clearly evident when parents are in an intact relationship.

Health services seem to find difficulty in coping when parents may be separated or in conflict. They seem unsure about what information to disclose to fathers who are generally not the main carers for children BUT are likely to have PR for their children. Much of the problem may be where one parent develops or initiates a relationship with the health service professionals and their engagement with the other parent is less or absent. It is however important to recognise the positive comments some fathers have made about their experience

'Nothing to say, healthcare professionals are usually extremely polite and respectful.'

'Midwife treated me as an equal parent. So did doctors'

'I have no complaints about the health service'

'As the father of 3 children I have always felt fully involved and valued during the labour and birth experience. Midwives were excellent in engaging me and involving me'

'Community midwife was superb.'

'I often take our children to GP as i have a more flexible job than my wife-i never experience problems'

Even where the experience has been broadly positive some worrying comments persist

'I have felt they have tried to include me in everything, but i definitely think this would be a different story if i wasn't with the mother of my daughter'

'Most are very good, however there are still some about who view men as useless at being parents'

At the second scan of my child I was needing permission from my sons mother to have a scan picture of my own son! I was declined a picture by the mother but one the nurses who worked there was kind enough to give me a scan picture in secret.

Some respondents felt that health professionals understanding of domestic abuse – particularly emotional abuse directed at fathers – was not as good as it should be

'My GP laughed- no, scoffed would be a better word, when I broached the subject of the emotional abuse I had suffered and told me it was nonsense. However, her colleague, whom I saw more recently, was more empathetic - But there is nothing they can do. Critical Care Team at Llandough who saw me on the night of my suicide threat last autumn and Mental Health team at Royal Glam who saw me more recently were both wonderful, empathizing with my pain and confirming I was perfectly sane and they understood my level of distress.'

'Doctor taking at face value a mothers allegation and believing that allegation, without proper investigation.'

'My doctor and the counsellor I saw for mental health problems as a result of years of abuse were brilliant. They recognised the situation, however it has been a struggle to find anyone else who were open to the fact that I was being abused.'

Many of the negative views expressed show a perception that information is not being shared by health professionals without the specific consent of the mother. This contributes to a sense of being a 'second class parent' that further marginalises male carers.

'Getting information from specific people eg children's GPs, hospitals and dental practices has proved very difficult to obtain without extensive chasing up and requirements of proof of PR, etc.'

'I might as well be invisible.'

'The inability of GP surgeries to keep dads informed is shocking. I know that the GP surgery software can accommodate separated parents but the surgery my boys are registered with says otherwise even after I tell them how to do it (I work with surgeries daily and know their operating system can do it)'

'I had to inform my little girls GP of an illness I had, when I knew where she was living I asked the GP to pass this information on he said that he could not pass it on unless she asked for it !! how would she know to ask for it ?'

'Health visitors refusing to share information and showing institutionally sexist behaviour'

'GP's can be judgemental when told both parents are not together; on one occasion even though I have PR a doctor refused to update me on my child's condition and would only speak to the Mother.'

There is also a widespread feeling that men are treated fundamentally differently to women in the same circumstances

'I was asked questions in the hospital that his mother has never been asked. Such as how often do I have my son overnight and have I been involved with social services.'

'While taking my daughter for jabs I was asked by the nurse if her mother was aware I was bringing her in.'

'GP's can be judgemental when told both parents are not together; on one occasion even though I have PR a doctor refused to update me on my child's condition and would only speak to the Mother.'

'Completely disregarded as not needed, get in the way, forgotten about. My points and experiences or opinions are not valued or respected. Very little services available for dad's. When it is, it is patronising and token only.'

*Health mostly works with mothers particularly in the early years.
It does get better as your kids get older*

'From the beginning even when I was still with my child's mother my opinion and questions were disregarded and ignored by GPs and midwives. I'm very knowledgeable about birthing and did lots of research, I asked the midwife about third stage intervention prevention and she literally scoffed ignored my genuine and reasonable question and carried on talking to my partner as though I wasn't there. This has since happened to my current partner and current midwife also. Men/fathers need to be recognised as valued and equally important birth partners and fathers. Fathers need to be taken seriously and given a voice and supported through parenthood not ignored side-lined and erased.'

Within the group of health professionals it is Health Visitors and to a lesser extent Midwives who are seen to be the most problematic to engage with by men

'Health visitor was condescending and even went against doctor's advice to put my son on Soya milk. She then made claims that the doctor had not prescribed that even though it was on his medical records. She implied there was one sided domestic abuse and made a recommendation based on her own personal bias against me.'

Midwives ignore the father.

'It's a difficult one to answer as my wife is a health visitor, the thing I found really difficult was issues around breast feeding where my daughter wasn't gaining enough weight. The health visitor and breast feeding specialist didn't really take my thoughts & fears in to consideration....'

'My impression of home visits (midwife, health visitor, etc.) is that I am being scrutinised for being there (e.g. does he seem overbearing because he's answering questions about the child rather than my wife? Is he controlling?)'

Midwives and health visitors could play down the role of the father and seemingly even suggest that the father was more of a burden.

Midwife was condescending during prenatal visits

SCHOOLS & EDUCATION

Positive experiences outweighed negative by almost 3:1. This is almost exactly the same proportion as in previous years and goes some way to validate the general view that most men have a good relationship with the education sector in their role as fathers.

198 respondents indicated that their experience was positive (strongly or mainly) while 74 reported their experience was negative (strongly or mainly). 125 individual comments were made by respondents to the survey.

The majority issue was, as in previous years, refusal or reluctance by some schools to engage equally with fathers – particularly when they are separated from the mother. It is clear from the positive experiences reported that schools are generally positive about working with fathers and that many are placed in difficulty when one parent makes claims or allegations about the other parent to the school. A recurring theme is the issue of Parental Responsibility which mothers have automatically while fathers do not.

There were a number of positive comments about schools

***‘Very helpful and recognise that not all children are academic’
positive get good communication from our local school mainly happy.***

I have nothing but praise for our schools

***My sons school have been amazing and I know if I need to talk to them about my son the doors
always open***

Have always felt that schools have engaged my wife and I equally

The picture changes slightly when the respondents are clearly no longer living with the mother of their children – though many still have a positive experience

After separation the schools were quite good at engaging with me as an equal parent

Schools needs to do more to acknowledge fathers in their correspondences and activities.

Other, mainly separated parents, have had mixed experiences with schools

My experiences are positive as a resident parent. I have seen so many NRP excluded

***It varies from school to school, some have included me as a parent others have excluded me and
I've had to go through official channels to fight for equal rights.....***

***My ex-partner has told the school a lot of lies and it has taken me years to change their way of
thinking towards me. Some of them still don't have a positive attitude towards me.***

The school have been ok. I get a bit of a vibe from some of the teachers and assume that the mother has said something to them about me but on the whole they keep me informed

Slightly more positive here as I used to be a teacher. Although my concerns are often brushed aside as (my perception only) an overprotective father.

Many of the comments seem to indicate that schools are heavily influenced by primary carer mothers acting as 'gate-keepers' of the relationship

I don't receive anything yet the school has my contact details. My ex wife does not accept that I have a right to be included (for no reason other than we are no longer together) and the school accepts that

The schools do not care / cannot be bothered to facilitate split families, feel neglected!

I was not allowed any information about how well my children had done in their levels with one school or their a levels with all 3 children. This was wrong. I still don't know today yet I am expected to pay their child maintenance during this time! V hurtful words

Whilst paying lip service to parental responsibility and accepting relationship with child, had to actually get court to specifically state in court order that I could attend school for e.g sports days etc before I was allowed to see daughter in school!

Never get information about events or school reports despite asking

Both the Primary School and The Comp have rejected me as my daughters' father, both refusing to allow me to meet with and speak to my daughters teachers. They have positively sided with my Ex.

I think that I have been excluded from a recent (March I believe) GCSE forum at the Comp and the Primary School Deputy Head told me not to raise my voice to her and treated me like a child. I saw my daughters French Tutor in Tescos today who was clearly ill at ease talking to me. In effect - the schools have rejected me, other than including me on e-mail bulletins.

I have to make my own appointments for parents evening My view isn't taken into account when it comes to decisions for my daughter

I have attended each school the children attended. In one I was removed by the headmaster due to mis-information supplied by my ex. I had to prove legal parental responsibility before being allowed back on school property. In the other school they have always failed to keep me updated on the children's progress, despite several requests

They side with the mother. I don't know about the educational needs of my children and I am excluded from school plays, productions etc.

PARENTING SUPPORT SERVICES

The responses received to this year's survey saw a dramatic improvement in the recognition of and experience with parenting support services – ranging from Communities First through Flying Start and into more bespoke service provision by Barnardos and Action for Children among others. Nearly 2/3rds (64.66%) had no experience with these services but this was reduced from the near 80% in previous years.

Satisfaction with parenting support was a more mixed picture. While 51 individuals reported a positive experience and just 34 a negative one, 44 respondents thought the support they received was neither good nor bad.

In praise of these services comments were made that

Parenting courses recommend for all and fun/ supportive even with women there!

Love the Flying Start we attend when we can and we bring our daughter on a wed when we can to go to the stay and play session so handy and not far from where we live .Also liked that can get her weighed there to.

Have had great experiences with NCT postnatal courses including weaning classes

Went to a parenting class was very informative & gave practical advice

Communities first have provided opportunities for positive family fun and financial advice and support

Communities first have been amazing in our area supporting myself wife and children. Without CF people are going to suffer

Both Communities First and Flying start have supported my family massively

Parenting classes was good they taught me that I can't change how my ex wife parents even if I don't agree with her parenting skills.

But this is a biased view as I was delivering it! Parenting Puzzle, a collaboration between flying start and Barnardo's

There was a strong sense that many men had experienced negativity from their engagement with parenting support however.

Team around the family - After I signed the consent form for them to get involved they totally ignored me. Llamau women's services - Caused a lot of problems.

But tokenistic, patronising. No ongoing plan

Most take the stance mother is best at first. But like most again after time they see the true issue is mother. After mother realises this the sessions are ended usually and it results in no change

Very hardline and too confrontational for services to take seriously.

We are not treated the same as women. They get more support.

I had a referrals along with mum to attend T.A.F (team around the family) mum had a referral to a women's support group. The support group (W/A) encouraged her to step outside of the recommended social service referrals (T.A.F) and go with D.A.'S.H (dom abuse stops here) there was no domestic abuse! I was then found to be isolated and unable to participate in improving the situation within the family unit.

Was invited to one parenting class and was made to feel invisible. Asked questions and answers were directed towards my wife!!!

Mothers are deemed to make better and more loving parents whilst fathers are treated as the bad disciplinarians

I have taken part in a parenting course - Parent Nurturing Programme by Action for Children. It was a good course but the women who ran the course had a fixed idea of a female approach to the classes and sidelined my views. When discussing my experiences of being a separated parent, they dismissed my needs to have access to the children to having contact every other weekend 'in the best interest of the children' despite me telling them that I was being coerced and controlled by my ex partner. They seem to feel it was ok for the mother to alienate me from the lives of my children

Negative experiences such as these may have led to one comment that appears to chime with the mood of responses

Are these all for women and girls?

CHILDREN'S SERVICES

As in previous years only a majority of respondents (59.73%) had no experience of Children's Services BUT those who did reported a negative experience by a margin of almost 3:1 (32 positive responses – 84 negative ones) while a surprisingly high number (31) said that their experience was neither good nor bad. The ratio of negative over positive experiences was however lower than the 2016 survey and closer to that in 2015.

There were a tiny number of positive comments submitted from fathers about their involvement with Children's Services. It is important to remember that social workers are doing a complex and difficult job where their focus is on the protection of and support for the child. Many parents – both male and female – can find that dynamic a hard one to understand and work with.

Some positive comments were made

Social services have been brilliant with my daughter regarding her Mother

Once social services are satisfied that father is saying the truth with hard proof they worked with him.

My partner and I recently adopted our son and our experience of social workers etc. has been incredibly positive.

A few professionals left specific comments about their experiences

I used to be involved with social services in an independent capacity and I was so disappointed with the way we have been treated.

Only on a professional level where I find them institutionally sexist in their approach - with one or two stand-out exceptions such as in Newport

As someone who used to work in social care I think things are getting better in that men are less 'demonised'. It is only a perception

There were many comments left that focussed on an uncaring or incompetent approach

Went to speak to them and left details to be contacted and they never did.

Even when they know that the children are being told things that are not true, they could do more to help the children because these children are suffering when they have had regular contact with father, grandparents and extended family.

There was some evidence that fathers may have sought help from Children's Services

Children's social services did not see my case as something they could support even though they were concerned about the mother's behaviour, not allowing children to see their father. It was family court who should get involved

I would love social services to be involved but without a costly court process or any obvious, recognized Abuse, there is no hope. Alienation is not sufficient but it should be

Overwhelmingly however the comments portrayed a very poor experience characterised by the strongest perception that social workers are misandrist.

***One quote from my child's social worker will always remain with me. "We do not support biological fathers to take care of their children whatever the circumstances ".
The worst part is she said biological fathers and not biological parents?***

Ignoring my concerns even after my eldest tried to commit suicide as he couldn't see me. He was 8 at the time. He tried again when he was 13. My second son was placed in foster care as mum couldn't cope. Why was he not put with me?

I can describe them in one word....useless

There aren't the words in existence

They say it's all about the child however this cannot be more wrong, it's about mother and child! Even when the mother is so bad you are pushed into a court room!!!

Only trouble with social services they are always on the mother's side because mother carried the baby even if mother was in the wrong, Dad has always got to prove himself

They are all about mum seeing the girls even after them saying (how) mum hit them and just give her a week's course for that. Kids scared but don't care as they tell me all kids should be with mum. Don't see the bigger picture.

They are not helpful at all they only support the mother

They seemed to do everything to keep me from my children, instead of working to keep us together.

Mother's family raised false issues. Social services investigated but found that issues were false. I wasn't informed of result.

There were also a number of comments that identified issues around Parental Alienation and other forms of emotional abuse of children that were not examined in a consistent way.

Even after extremely negative psychological assessment social workers recommendations favoured the mother. Not aware of parental alienation and by the time they realised what was going on 2 years had passed

***Didn't have resources to deal with emotional abuse.
Wasn't a significant enough matter....apparently***

Once the local authority know that matters are in private law they did not want to get involved. Until parental alienation is recognised the situation will I fear never change.

CAFCASS CYMRU

Almost 2/3rds of respondents (62.74%) had no dealing with this specialist arm of Welsh Government – that provides advice to the Family Courts. Some of those who did respond to this question reported the experience of friends and family members rather than their own. There was a slight improvement in the proportion of negative to positive comments about Cafcass Cymru so the ratio was 3.5:1 in favour of the negative (24 positive compared to 86 negative). 95 comments were also received.

It is important to understand the fundamental difference in the nature of the service provided by Cafcass Cymru, Children's Services or the Police, that mark these services out for negative comparison. They are not universal services like Health /Education and are significantly more likely to be involved in conflicting scenarios to respondents to the survey.

As with all other areas of the survey there were some compliments

Contact with Cafcass officer was positive but my ex-wife's application was withdrawn before recommendations were made to the court.

I work for an agency and I have had some contact with Cafcass over the years. Usually contact has been positive

The CAFCASS officer I dealt with was very professional, amicable, down to earth and very child focused. We didn't always agree, but could see each other's point of view. A good role model for CAFCASS.

Our experience with Cafcass was very supportive for the children & gave their finding to the family court & a support plan to get the children back in touch with their father, but if the mother does not let the children go there is no follow up.

Lucky to have ultimately found 1 CAFCASS officer who saw through the tissue of lies and actually assessed evidence

A handful of respondents had second hand experience of engagement with Cafcass Cymru either through another family member or a close friend. Their experience was overwhelmingly poor – BUT not a direct one

my only experience is through my brother, where we found Cafcass very biased towards protecting the mother.

Although aware of many who have had appalling experiences and were discriminated against

Some of the comments made about Cafcass Cymru were actually more about the Family Justice system or the difficulties of making child contact work.

It's the system and process that's damaging. 2 sec7 reports in 18 months noting that the children want and need contact..... Yet 12 months later i am still with limited contact and fighting.

Cafcass gave their report to the court & the court gave me full access to my children, but when contact didn't happen, no follow up from social workers to help with the children being alienated from me

Every court order broken or disrupted, but nothing done about it.

Shocked at how one-sided CAF/CASS appear to function and non-objective. Very strongly felt that they are aware of the 'power' they have to influence the court's decision; I power I feel they do not deserve and should not have given the level of incompetency I experienced on their part.

I can't afford this. Contact was ok until our divorce was finalized and the finances agreed. Since then I have lost contact with two of my three children.

Some respondents thought their engagement with Cafcass Cymru had good and bad points

I had one good cafcass officer and one really bad one who lied to my face and told court the opposite to what he told me

They have done the job required of them but no more than that.

I had an excellent CAF/CASS senior manager for 9 months who challenged the mum and supported me eventually. I then had a hired agency cafcass worker who thought the children's best interest were for the children to not see me - using the paramountcy principle. This could not be in their best interests logically but court upheld advice of childrens' guardian and hired cafcass officer

Typically the same as children's services although in fairness not quite as bad.

It isn't surprising that a large proportion of the comments made about Cafcass Cymru were negative ones given the dynamics of the Family Justice system. However many of the negative comments suggest that there is an anti-male agenda from individual officers.

Waste of time! No powers! Mother wouldn't go - so tough dad!!

Treat dads like second class citizens

Useless and they don't care either....

Was told by solicitor that they will always choose mother over father and that fighting against them is a waste of money.

The Guardian actively disengaged with me from the beginning, preferring to believe the lies made by mother.

7 positive Cafcass reports yet still this could not support my application for a reasonable contact order, nor did it enforce or identify repercussions on mother when she kept breaching the orders.

She opened with I believe children should spend more time with one parent over the other. This was a losing battle from the start.

*Cafcass cherry pick statement's, twist the truth, leave important facts out of statement's,
Cafcass will change their section 7 Report on the day of the court case*

Another USELESS Department most probably costing the tax payer millions of pounds each year. In my experience I had to deal with a sexist man hating woman who made things worse for me and this was after I was the parent who requested cafcass become involved...

CafCass are wholly gender biased. The CafCass Officer invented her report, ignored my 6 year relationship with my children and told me in Court I would NOT see my children as much as I was used to - this was before the Court hearing had ended. The whole process was rigged...

Completely one sided, explained that they would have several meetings with my children without my ex wife present to establish whether or not they wanted contact with me. Instead they spoke to them once with my ex in the room so the children all said what she had told them to say.

Again, there seems to be an unbalanced view by Cafcass to support the mother before evidence has been tested. Cafcass have written two reports to date. On both occasions I met with the Cafcass officer beforehand and she expressed that contact with my son should start as soon as possible. Yet, in both of the subsequent reports, she has recommended no contact.

Inherently sexist and an absolute disgrace, looking for any possibility to show mothers in a good light even if, as in my case, mother had convictions for assault on me and my partner and a two year restraining order. Ignored by CAFCASS who did think it was important to state that her house was decorated to an extremely high standard. Lazy and do not want to bother to do any work

Biased, manipulative, lying, disrespectful, agenda driven. Took the respondents lies as fact and didn't even ask my side of things just wrote report after report of lies and twisted half truths based on the mothers lies. Hindered contact with my son for years with no genuine cause or reason other than the hearsay and sayso of my ex. I despise CAFCASS, I tried complaining and complaints were ignored or not followed up. They are a law unto themselves with no legitimate controls, answerable to nobody. Very dangerous to vulnerable children. There needs to be a complete overhaul of the family courts system starting with the dissolution of CAFCASS

They are a bloody joke and have refused to conduct wishes and wants interviews with my children after I've requested the same. Cardiff Civil Justice Centre said this was directly contravening their duty. But who will listen as I'm not a mother.???

Cafcass listened to my ex wife's allegations at face value and made me feel guilty without listening to my views. I tried to explain that these allegations were false but they first of all didn't want me to have any contact with my children. Then the judge overruled them...

I found CAFCASS prejudiced from the beginning and it was impossible to get them to listen to or look at the report from my mental health counsellor that showed I had been abused for years. The fact my daughter did not want to see me was seen as my behaviour not the parental alienation.

Identified that my children were being emotionally abused though alienation but failed to deal with issue

POLICE

This is the second year that we've asked questions about the experience of the Police services in Wales. Perhaps surprisingly the ratio (2.75:1) of negative comments (77) compared to positive (28) about the Police were lower than about Cafcass Cymru (3.5:1)

It is unsurprising that almost all comments left in this section related to child contact disputes where the Police have been involved by one side or often both.

There were some examples of positive experience that may inform best practice when the Police are called.

Police have been very supportive..... They have investigated all allegations against my son & we have been informed of outcome throughout.

Very helpful but have no powers they have hand it down to social services

Police came to my house after my partner reported to the police about my daughter's mother's boyfriend pulling my arm into his car and trying to drive off with me attached to the car I was lucky to get away. The police was brilliant at dealing with the situation

We had a visit from the police as the mother reported our child as having been 'taken' from her (untrue); they attended and were happy that the child was well and happy, and reported that information back to the mother.

After acquittal and logging complaint they were very helpful and supportive. Also upon arrest they were reasonable and respectful.

Several comments were left about the experience of dealing with the Police that showed an understanding of the difficulty sometimes faced by officers when they are called into child contact disputes – even ones where criminal offences may have been committed.

I only involved the Police on one occasion when my ex broke the Court Order and withheld contact. They were pleasant and explained there was little they could do with a civil matter other than undertake a welfare check

I rang the police and had myself arrested after I slapped my wife. After years of abuse and my life completely controlled I reacted to being shouted at and told again that I could not take my daughter out on my own. The arresting officer was very good. I was treated badly at first in the station because I had hit my wife, but they soon became more supportive. I do feel they failed in recognising that I was the one being abused and couldn't take it anymore. Instead I was the abuser.

When the Police hear my account (they have been called out twice in the last few months in connection with suicidal intent) they are hugely supportive and say they wish they could do more. HOWEVER, when my Ex unilaterally withdrew access after six years in may 2016 and I asked the Police what they would do if I turned up as usual to see my children, I was told I would be arrested. I feel the Police are in an impossible position. They see the truth but can do nothing about it.

They have always been really good to me. However on one occasion they took my child from my house on a false report from my ex-partner. The officer was very nice, but I am now aware he wasn't allowed to take my child from me.

Initially poor experience in terms of being felt judged by officers sent to interview me and the feeling of being 'guilty until proven innocent' (rather than the other way round). However, of late having approached the police myself with concerns regarding my ex-wife, I felt very supported and that my concerns were being taken seriously.

There persists however a very strong thread in the comments made by men that there is a core of gender bias against men when the Police are called – often by the mother

When ex picks up telephone to the police, I'm always on the back foot.

Police really are not interested, almost as a father you are guilty of whatever has been told to them by the mother.

Always back the mother, threatened me with putting the children into care if I did not return them to their mum, despite me having parental responsibility and the children being safe and settled and NOT having seen a social worker to do a welfare check

I have been threatened with arrest several times when mother decides she wants our child home, she uses the police and courts to her own advantage and scares the child when several police officers are threatening me with arrest over a civil matter.

Police strongly biased in favour of mother. The police lied and denied basic human rights to father, acting in a criminal and totally unprofessional manner.

A WPC helping my ex-partner take child from my and her home with just the mother's evidence not interested what I had to say

The police did not recognise anything about coercive control going on with the resident parent

They are happy to keep coming to my house we she calls them even when I prove it's fake reports but not willing to help me when I got attacked saying I was a man and when I had proof of harassment said they won't do anything to her as it might push her too much. It was a year before they would look into the kids getting hit by mum as they wouldn't believe me it was on when the school called to say the children had said it in school

Used to respect the police, but the manner in which they dealt with the grandchildren and our son was out of order. They 'invaded' our property, interviewed a child without anyone else present and then arrested our son. We were taken to the police station and interviewed and then allowed home with the children and told to look after them - first time for them to be away from one or other of the parents. Case did not proceed and was a 'trumped up' allegation.

The police have taken my girls twice and for no good reason other than mother's false information - again, I was the villain - no action against her...

***The police attended my property mob handed and threatened to arrest me
over a civil law matter. Wankers !!***

***I have been asked not to go into the street where they live and even stay out of the village
where possible although there has never been any violence or aggression
I am not to make contact therefore cannot ask to see my child***

***They make the situation work and put restrictions between the children and myself.
Then the mother takes advantage of this and uses this to stop any contact.
They add to the alienation and make it worse. They do not see both sides to the situation
and do not understand that they are used by the mothers side.***

***USELESS again your automatically treated like you're the problem and then fobbed off with
well we don't get involved it's a social services and courts problem...***

***Ex wife made false allegations of threats to kill, I was arrested and dragged out of my home in
front of my children which resulted in my oldest who was then 12 to run away. Once at the station
I was intimidated and told to just own up to it as they were going to listen to the call made by my
ex wife again and can pick out any background noise and enhance it. They came back ten minutes
later didn't say anything apart from you can go there isn't any evidence,***

***All police say when you are the victim of abuse from your ex partner and they know about it is.
"You are between a rock and a hard place and I would not want to be you!"***

When fathers seeks help from the Police they often report that they are very badly treated

***Even when trying to report a welfare concern to the police,
they see me as the abuser and not the mother***

***Despite the mother making death threats to me in front of a HEDDLU GWENT POLICE officer I was
routinely told things like 'What sort of man are you, being scared of a woman?' On reporting a
breach of a restraining order I was told to stop wasting their time. Absolute disgrace!***

***Having been assaulted by ex-wife, I contact police to report incident and explain for interest of
child relationship not to press charges. I then get arrested and have to defend myself under arrest
due to her false accusations.***

***The officer who dealt with me was totally against me from day one. He believed mums every word
and became very abusive to me. During an interview in which I was making a formal complaint he
was walking around the room shouting at me. I had to actually stand up and attempt to leave the
room asking for another officer to be present. He put his hand on the door blocking me.
He NEVER reported my complaint. Trust the police? You have got to be kidding.***

It appears that many fathers believe that the Police are being used to secure an advantage
in child contact disputes – yet the Police sometimes seem unaware of this ‘tactic’.

EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

We asked a new question in the 2017 survey about mental health and well-being as a father / male carer. We identified a number of indicators of poor mental health and asked respondents whether they had experienced any of them. Respondents could identify with multiple indicators.

The single largest response was that men had talked about low mood with friends, family and colleagues (41.36%) Unsurprisingly the second highest response (41.08%) came for the 'None of the above' indicator – pointing to the fact that most men don't recognise any significant problems in their role as a father.

Significantly more worrying was the high number (75 representing 21.25% of respondents) who stated that they 'felt suicidal and unable to cope'. In the detailed comments a significant number of respondents used the word 'suicide' or 'suicidal' overwhelmingly when they also identified child contact difficulties following separation.

Many comments about low mood or difficulties in coping were made by men who are, from the context of their answers, still living in intact families.

It was very tiring and stressful when the kids were young, as a parental couple we're lucky that we supported each other

I feel low sometimes. But thankfully I have a good wife and friendship group.

I suffered depression badly after my son was born

2 episodes of stress related illness meaning that I had to take time off work, often fatigued and occasionally stressed

i tend to try and deal with it myself and rarely talk to others about my problems. but on occasions stress from work and family has got too much, especially when the kids were very young and I was working long hours. I have taken shorts bits of time off for stress and depression but haven't been to doctors and I usually I just say I'm sick.

Being a stay at home dad was more difficult than i thought, and often felt people (mostly other blokes) judged me to be a less of a man as my wife was the main earner.

I have and still suffer from depression since having a child but have not had any time off sick because of it. From my experience, it is completely understandable for a new mum to be tired and possibly off the ball with their job. The same is not shown for new Dads. I am expected to function in exactly the same way as I always have while being sleep deprived and exhausted.

I found the balance of family life, work and volunteering to be incredibly stressful. Not having any time to myself or realising that the way I felt was a common thing dragged me down for a period of approx. 7 weeks and resulted in taking 3 weeks off work. I became exceptionally anxious and couldn't be in any crowds. As an introvert the transition to parenthood was intense

Some of the responses explored the seemingly different expectations that fathers felt that society places on them as well as the type and level of support available compared to mothers

The pressure on fathers is immense. My wife had help with her PND but I have received no help at all with the stresses associated with coping with work, childcare and looking after a wife with PND. Fathers are forgotten about. We are told that a modern man is sensitive and it's ok to show emotion yet we are, at the same time, expected to cope with all the family's issues and just get on with it. It's no wonder suicide rates are higher in young men - the expectations are enormous.

Everyone assumes that dads can cope, sometimes we can't, there appears to be plenty of emotional support for mums but very little for dads. We're expected to shrug everything off & just carry on working, supporting the mother and helping to look after the baby. At first it's very hard

You do your best but every day there are an army of anti-father professionals looking for every opportunity to make it impossible for you to have a relationship with your children.

I have often felt that there isn't really an outlet for discussing low mood relating to coping with the stresses of balancing newly found fatherhood with work commitments etc. It manifests itself in an 'anxiety', like feeling that there's too many things to do but you don't know where to begin - so you almost become debilitated/frozen and nothing gets done and this makes you feel worse and it can spiral downwards. It's hard to find the right person to share feelings with because men shouldn't be experiencing this as they have the easier role.

Very likely linked to previous work and their apparent lack of recognition of my preference to be a father my children - care \ support service ignored my requests to work during school hours often requiring me to work weekends etc.

Some men found that counselling as well as the support of family and friends was very important

Mind Cymru helped me get through severe anxiety when I was going through such a bad situation. The staff really know how to bring you back up to reality when you feel so closed in and trapped

Had some counselling - it helped.

However much of the narrative around help seeking and counselling stemmed from the difficulties many men reported with child contact problems.

I have undergone counselling and have also undertaken a stress and anxiety course with Cardiff Mind - both very useful. I feel that wider society do not understand or care about stress, anxiety in fathers and do not care about children having a meaningful relationship with their father after a marriage has broken down

Gp was due to me having little sleep due to stress of courts, social services, and caring for my son alone the sleeping tablets were the wrong thing, when talking was the best help I found through family

Depression brought on by emotional abuse by ex before separation - exacerbated after by her behaviour regarding the children, marital home and finances. I pulled through with help from MIND and my GP

Over 8 years now it does not get better, each day is another day lost. I don't see any light just a dark place I wake up to every morning.

Its like a living bereavement. I know my child loves me and wants to see me, but his mother prevents any contact as far as she is able.

My experiences in the family court contributed to me having a nervous breakdown in 2014. My GP was superb and prescribed me some meds. i accessed counselling (for free) via MIND and that was superb too. i recovered fully after 12/18 months

The adversarial nature of the Family Court also seemed to contribute to poorer mental health amongst men

I was too scared to seek help in case it made me look bad while I was fighting for access, my ex-wife would have used it against me and made me out to be unstable.

Ruined my work life and ability to earn, had to go self-employed. Significant sums spent on counselling. It all feels so futile and unjust, like you are trying to prove yourself

I have never had any mental health problems until I split up with my partner, and she denied me access to my daughter

The loss of not seeing your children takes away the ability to cope with the day to day stuff and the thoughts become all-consuming of the loss.

I experienced severe stress when being threatened with losing contact with my children, due to the actions of the mother and the universal and complete irrational bias of the judicial system against fathers.

Unless you have experienced it you cannot imagine the heartache of being apart from your children. I have gone through all of the above emotions. When you have a mother who is a parental alienator it is devastating for your children and yourself.

I have had time off during child act proceedings for stress and more recently recommenced anti-anxiety medication following ongoing difficulties with ex-wife

The low mood was a consequence of the state system not allowing me to see my children. Why don't the police, judges etc use evidence or lack of it and previous behaviour before the ex went viral? Why is the one who makes the accusations obviously right?

being a dad is amazing and my reason for being really... but having that hindered or taken away from me, not seeing my six month old son for five months straight waiting for the courts to grant me access to my boy nearly killed me. It was only the thought of how hurt my son would be that stopped me jumping. The GP was useless and unhelpful just offered pills not counselling.

If I wasn't strong enough I would be dead and my son would be fatherless. BECAUSE OF THIS BROKEN SYSTEM. I was lucky. Other fathers and children don't make it through.

Father's testimonies showed a strong sense of injustice and betrayal by a 'system' that they expected would help them to maintain a relationship with their children but actually did the opposite

Feel abandoned by the agency's that should help you see your child, automatically treated as the lesser parent and unless you got maybe tens of thousands in the bank left with the feeling of despair and never seeing your child again

Feelings of nowhere to turn in an age old system where men are automatically at fault and frowned upon. Feelings of worthlessness and being a second class parent just because your relationship has come to an end. Feeling like the biggest weapons used against you is your love for your children.

My mum and dad have been really good but sometimes it does my head in that I'm good enough to be chased for maintenance but she can just stop me seeing our daughter

Due to the mothers antics with no comebacks from the courts and the bias of the system and the lack of support and equality for fathers made me very sad/frustrated resulting in depressive episodes and required support from NHS and MIND on several occasions.

I've talked about these issues enough. Every waking moment can be turned to the thoughts of the ongoing abuse my children, my family, and I, suffer at the hands of my former partner. Abuse that is enabled by a wholly inadequate and discriminatory system.

When my wife left she ran with the children to her boyfriends and would call saying kill yourself and I would never see the kids again and that was a lot for me. The kids mean the world to me.

A shockingly large number of men reported suicidal thoughts in the survey linked to problems of child contact.

I attempted suicide ten years ago when my ex wife told me if I didn't hand the house over to her she would tell enough lies to ensure I never saw my children again

Its been about 6 years now since seeing her every night I wake up thinking about her I cannot sleep I have sat in my car many a time wanted to end it all I take things out on my wife I have to go to work but when I am home spend a lot of time on my own up all night when in work I put on a face they don't know the half of it

I feel like ending it all sometimes because the system of the family court, cafcass and others help the mother behave appallingly and do not intervene when she is trying to stop me from seeing the children. It's a tragedy that I am being exploited and controlled by my ex telling me when I can have the children etc otherwise she'll stop contact. I can't take it anymore.

Having my children taken away from me. I was very close to my sons. Then having 42 allegations against me just so that she could get legal aid. Suicide seemed the best option. Twice I tried to hang myself and once I stood on a railway track. The Samaritans talked me off the track.

Perhaps the most powerful contribution we've had in any response to our Dads survey came from one man who simply stated the following

**I never stop thinking about taking my own life. There is NO help available. I just want to share my daughters' lives, that's all. I don't want to be told I'm depressed etc etc. I know that. My life has become totally impossible. I never did anything wrong. I have lost my entire family who have chosen to believe my Ex's lies and my children's not wishing to see me being my own fault. I am completely alone and will almost certainly kill myself at some point; which, as all the mental Health specialists acknowledge, would be a perfectly rational and reasonable thing to do.
Its only about....when?**

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June 2017

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